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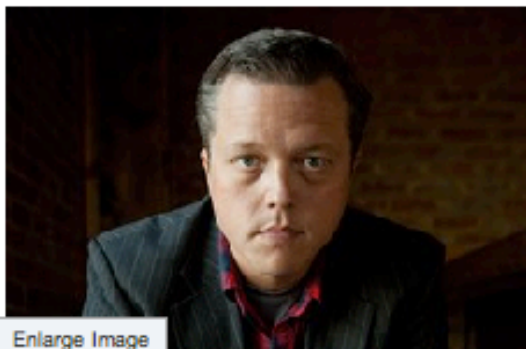
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Jason Isbell, Happily Singing Sad Songs

By **STEVE DOUGHERTY**

After closing his set with a ditty about death, Jason Isbell wryly suggested that his listeners go out and see a feel-good movie, or catch a show by Cirque de Soleil.

"Yeah, I hoped they would do something happy to get that taste out of their mouth," says Mr. Isbell, a former mainstay of the alt-country rock band Drive-By Truckers. Now solo, he was performing a set at New York City's Rockwood Music Hall to showcase his new album of emotion-freighted story songs, "Southeastern," due June 11. "It's important not to bring everybody down too much, but I like to be up there playing those really sad songs."



[Enlarge Image](#)

Michael Wilson

Accompanied by his bride of three months, Amanda Shires, whose sweet mournful fiddle playing helped set the mood, Mr. Isbell, strumming a six-string and singing in a rich, clear-channel tenor, made death by cancer ("Elephant"), homicide ("Live Oak") and despair ("Stockholm") sound good.

"Even when you're singing about miserable characters," he says, "there's

a happiness in doing it right. If you tell a good story, there's a joy in that that transcends unhappy subject matter."

As much as he enjoys conjuring misery in song, Mr. Isbell says that he's never been happier. After a failed marriage (to former Drive-By Truckers bassist Shonna Tucker) and seeming bound for a booze-fueled fall, he turned his life around. In the space of a year, he quit drinking, finished a tour with fellow musician-in-recovery Ryan Adams, moved to Nashville to be with Ms. Shires, got engaged, recorded "Southeastern" on the eve of their February wedding and listened to final mixes while honeymooning in Costa Rica.

Amid all that whiplash life change, sobriety seems to have been the linchpin. "I wouldn't have gotten married if I hadn't quit drinking, I can tell you that for sure," Mr. Isbell says. "She wouldn't have put up with any more of that."

"When I did quit, and quit going out and got serious in my relationship, I was cleaning up my life in a lot of respects," he says. "For the first time in my life, I became a contributing member of society—a civilian. Adult, I guess, is the word for that."

On stage, the rapport between the newlyweds is plainly evident. "I remember from my first marriage, being in a band with my first wife; it can be really, really difficult if things aren't going right," Mr. Isbell says. "A lot of people remember Linda kicking Richard Thompson in the shins when he's trying to play a solo. That's tough when that happens in front of an audience."

"But if things are going right as they are for me and Amanda, it's beautiful."

A gifted songwriter and performer in her own right, Ms. Shires, whose third solo album, "Down Fell The Doves," (Lightning Rod), is due Aug. 6, appears on one track of "Southeastern;" but she played a larger, impossible-to-credit role in birthing the album.

"We had just moved in together and got engaged," says Mr. Isbell. "We didn't want to spend a second apart from each other. But we needed to get some work done. So we decided that two or three times a week we'll get up in the morning and you'll go to one part of the house and I'll go to another and we won't go to the movies or go out to dinner or watch Netflix or play Scrabble until we're each done writing a song. Then we'll play it for each other."

Mr. Isbell says that half the 12 tracks on "Southeastern" came from those writing sessions and "probably that many on her record too."

"It's a little intimidating," he says of the couple's head-to-head writing challenge. "She's got really good taste. I think there is [a sense of competition] but it's friendly competition; you don't want to get too competitive with your wife about anything. Like her grandfather says, you can either be happy or you can be right."

Raised in an extended musical family in one of the most music-rich sections of the south—his hometown of Greenhill, Ala. is a short drive from Muscle Shoals, Ala., home to FAME Studios, a soul music shrine—Mr. Isbell was taught to play and sing by his paternal grandfather, a Pentecostal preacher. "My first real exposure was a form of day care," he says. "My parents couldn't afford to send me anywhere they had to pay for so I stayed with my grandparents; my grand dad would play music and teach me to play really early on. He did it to spend time with me and to bond, but also to keep my hands busy and keep me from breakin' stuff."

Schooled in his grandfather's gospel and "old country stuff," Mr. Isbell was sitting in "with the grown-ups" on bandstands as a 15-year-old high schooler. "My parents would drop me off on a Friday or Saturday night [at local restaurants that featured live music] and I would be there for three or four hours sitting in; some of those folks were David Hood [father of Drive-By Truckers co-founder Patterson Hood] and Spooner Oldham and other people who had worked on the Muscle Shoals [recordings] in the 1960s and '70s. As I got older, soul became my favorite kind of music and I listened and studied it. I went 'Wow! David from the Mexican restaurant played on "I'll Take You There," by the Staples Singers!'"

After playing in local rock and country bar bands, Mr. Isbell was a junior at the University of Memphis when he was offered a 45-minute solo spot at a local coffee house. "I stayed up the night before the show and wrote 45 minutes worth of songs," he recalls. "Those were the songs that got me a publishing deal. Monthly money for writing songs!"

Back home in Alabama, Mr. Isbell's friendship with Mr. Hood led to an invitation to join the Drive-By Truckers in 2001. Six years later, Mr. Isbell launched his solo career following what may be the most congenial breakup in rock history.

"People keep looking for some of us to start bad-mouthing the other person, but it was just time. If you live in an apartment—in our case, a house trailer moving at 70 miles per hour—with six or seven of your closest friends for six years, there's gonna come a time when you want to move out."

Instead of public feuding, the former busmates stay in touch. "I talked to Patterson last night," says Mr. Isbell. "He's a big movies guy and we talk a lot about movies and books."

As for his own story line, Mr. Isbell says the dramatics were kept to a minimum. When he quit drinking, he says, "there wasn't gunfire or anything. I just wanted to remember all this stuff. When it happened with the Truckers, I had a real good run but I don't really remember most of it."

"Most times you don't get two chances to find success in the music business. This time I want to remember all the little things, all the good shows and all the good days."